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NORDAU'S DEGENERATION—EXTRACTS FROM A LETTER FROM G. BERNARD SHAW IN LIBERTY, NEW YORK



HAVE heard it all before. At every new birth of energy in art the same alarm has been raised; and, as these alarms always had their public, like prophecies of the end of the world, there is nothing surprising in the fact that a book which might have been produced by playing the resurrection man in the old newspaper rooms of our public libraries, and collecting all the exploded bogey-criticisms of the last half century into a huge volume, should have a considerable success. To give you an idea of the heap of material ready to hand for such a compilation, let me lay before you a sketch of one or two of the reformations in art which I have myself witnessed.

MR. SHAW BEGINS—

When I was engaged chiefly in the criticism of pictures, the Impressionist movement was struggling for life in London; and I supported it vigorously because, being the outcome of heightened attention and quickened consciousness on the part of its disciples, it was evidently destined to improve pictures greatly by substituting a natural, observant, real style for a conventional, taken-for-granted, ideal one. The result has entirely justified my choice of sides. I can remember when Mr. Whistler, in order to force the public to observe the qualities he was introducing into pictorial work, had to exhibit a fine drawing of a girl with the head deliberately crossed out with a few rough pencil strokes, knowing perfectly well that if he left a woman's face discernible the British Philistine would simply look to see whether she was a pretty girl or not, or whether she represented some of his pet characters in fiction, and pass on without having seen any of the qualities of artistic execution which made the drawing valuable. But it was easier for the critics to resent the obliteration of the face as an insolent eccentricity, and to show their own good manners by writing of Mr. Whistler as "Jimmy," than to think out what he meant. It took several years of "propaganda by deed" before the qualities which the Impressionists insisted on came to be looked for as a matter of course in pictures, so that even the ordinary picture-gallery frequenter, when he came face to face with Bouguereau's "Girl in a Cornfield," instead of accepting it as a window-glimpse of nature, saw at a glance that the girl is really standing in a studio with what the house agents call "a good north light," and that the cornfield is a conventional sham. This advance in public education was effected by persistently exhibiting pictures which, like Mr. Whistler's girl with her head scratched out, were propagandist

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samples of workmanship rather than complete works of art. But the moment Mr. Whistler and other really able artists forced the dealers and the societies of painters to exhibit these studies, and, by doing so, to accustom the public to tolerate what appeared to it at first to be absurdities, the door was necessarily opened to real absurdities. It is exceedingly difficult to draw or paint well; it is exceedingly easy to smudge paper or canvas so as to suggest a picture, just as the stains on an old ceiling or the dark spots in a glowing coal-fire do. Plenty of rubbish of this kind was produced, exhibited, and tolerated at the time when people could not see the difference between any daub in which there were shadows painted in vivid aniline hues and a landscape by Monet. Not that they thought the daub as good as Monet: they thought the Monet as ridiculous as the daub; but they were afraid to say so, because they had discovered that people who were good judges did not think Monet ridiculous.



Further, the Impressionist movement led to a busy study of the atmosphere, conventionally supposed to be invisible, but seldom really completely so, and of what were called "values": that is, the relation of light and dark between the various objects depicted.



Naturally the public eye, with its utilitarian familiarity with local color, and its Philistine insensibility to values and atmosphere, did not at first see what the Impressionists were driving at, and dismissed them as mere perverse, notoriety-hunting cranks. Here, then, you had a movement in painting which was wholly beneficial and progressive, and in no sense insane or decadent. Nevertheless, it led to the public exhibition of daubs which even the authors themselves would never have presumed to offer for exhibition before; it betrayed aberrations of vision in painters who, on the old academic lines, would have hidden their defects by drawing objects as they knew them to exist, and not as they saw them; it set hundreds of clear-sighted students practising optical distortion, so as to see things myopically; and it substituted canvases which looked like enlargements of obscure photographs for the familiar portraits of masters of the hounds in cheerfully unmistakable pink coats, mounted on bright chestnut horses. All of which, and much else, to a man who looked on at it without any sense of the deficiencies in conventional painting, necessarily suggested that the Impressionists and their contemporaries were much less sane than their fathers.

**IN THE CONTROVERSY WHICH RAGED AROUND THE
WAGNER MUSIC DRAMAS—**

The sequel was the same as in the Impressionist movement. Wagner, Berlioz and Liszt, in securing tolerance for their own works, secured it for what sounded to many people absurd; and this tolerance

necessarily extended to a great deal of stuff which was really absurd, but which the secretly-bewildered critics dared not denounce, lest it, too, should turn out to be great, like the music of Wagner, over which they had made the most ludicrous exhibition of their incompetence. Even at such stupidly-conservative concerts as those of the London Philharmonic Society, I have seen ultra-modern composers, supposed to be representatives of the Wagnerian movement, conducting rubbish in no essential superior to Jullien's British army quadrilles.

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Here, again, you see, you have a progressive, intelligent, wholesome, and thoroughly sane movement in art, producing plenty of evidence to prove the case of any clever man who does not understand music, but who has a theory which involves the proposition that all the leaders of the art movements of our time are degenerate and, consequently, retrogressive lunatics.

IN THE MODERN DISCUSSION OF SOCIAL QUESTIONS, SUCH AS ARE RAISED IN THE PLAYS OF IBSEN—

You have here again a movement which is thoroughly beneficial and progressive presenting a hideous appearance of moral corruption and decay, not only to our old-fashioned religious folk, but to our comparatively modern scientific folk as well. And here again, because the press and the gossips have found out that this apparent corruption and decay is considered the right thing in some influential quarters, and must be spoken of with respect, and patronized and published and sold and read, we have a certain number of pitiful imitators taking advantage of their tolerance to bring out really silly and rotten stuff, which the reviewers are afraid to expose, lest it, too, should turn out to be the correct thing.

THEN CAME "DEGENERATION"—

After this long preamble you will have no difficulty in understanding the sort of book Nordau has written. Figure to yourself a huge volume, stuffed with the most slashing of the criticisms which were hurled at the Impressionists, the Tone Poets, and the philosophers and dramatists of the Schopenhauerian revival, before these movements had reached the point at which it began to require some real courage to attack them. Imagine a rechauffée, not only of the newspaper criticisms of this period, but actually of all its little parasitic paragraphs of small talk and scandal, from the long-forgotten jibes against Mr. Oscar Wilde's momentary attempt to bring knee-breeches into fashion years ago, to the latest scurrilities about "the New Woman." Imagine the general staleness and occasional putrescence of this mess disguised by a dressing of the terminology invented by Krafft-Ebing, Lombroso, and all the latest specialists in madness and crime, to describe the artistic faculties and propensities as they operate in the insane. Imagine all this done by a man who is a vigorous

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and capable journalist, shrewd enough to see that there is a good opening for a big reactionary book as a relief to the Wagner and Ibsen booms, bold enough to let himself go without respect to persons or reputations, lucky enough to be a stronger, clearer-headed man than ninety-nine out of a hundred of his critics, besides having a keener interest in science, a born theorist, reasoner and busybody, and so able, without insight, originality, or even any very remarkable intensive industry, to produce a book which has made a very considerable impression on the artistic ignorance of Europe and America. For he says a thing as if he meant it; he holds superficial ideas obstinately and sees them clearly; and his mind works so impetuously that it is a pleasure to watch it—for a while. All the same, he is shallow and unfeeling enough to be the dupe of a theory which would hardly impose on one of those gamblers who have a system or martingale, founded on a solid rock of algebra, by which they can infallibly break the bank at Monte Carlo. "Psychiatry" takes the place of algebra in Nordau's martingale.

IN NORDAU'S VISION—

Symptoms of degeneracy are visible in all directions, culminating at various points in such hysterical horrors as Wagner's music, Ibsen's dramas, Manet's pictures, Tolstoi's novels, Whitman's poetry, Dr. Jaeger's woollen clothing, vegetarianism, scepticism as to the infallibility of vivisection and vaccination, Anarchism and humanitarianism, and, in short, everything that Herr Nordau does not happen to approve of.

HE LABORIOUSLY AND TRIUMPHANTLY POINTS TO FLAWS IN THE LIVES & WORKS OF HIS VICTIMS; BUT—

The exaltation of the greatest artists is not continuous; you cannot defend every line of Shakspeare or every stroke of Titian. Since the artist is a man and his patron a man, all human moods and grades of development are reflected in art; consequently the Puritan's or the Philistine's indictment of art has as many counts as the misanthrope's indictment of humanity. And this is the Achilles' heel of art at which Nordau has struck. He has piled the Puritan on the Philistine, the Philistine on the misanthrope, in order to make out his case. Let me describe to you one or two of his typical artifices as a special pleader making the most of the eddies at the sides of the stream of progress.

SOME OF NORDAU'S PET TRICKS FOR PROVING DE- GENERATION—

When a man with a turn for rhyming goes mad, he repeats rhymes as if he were quoting a rhyming dictionary. You say "Come" to him, and he starts away with "Dumb, plum, sum, rum, numb, gum," and so on. This the doctors call "echolalia." Dickens gives a specimen of indulgence in it by sane people in "Great Expectations," where Mr.

Jaggers's Jewish client expresses his rapture of admiration for the lawyer by exclaiming: "Oh, Jaggerth, Jaggerth, Jaggerth; all otherth ith Cag-Maggerth, give me Jaggerth!" There are some well-known verses by Swinburne, beginning, "If love were what the rose is," which, rhyming and tripping along very prettily, express a sentiment without making any intelligible statement whatsoever; and we have plenty of nonsensically inconsequent nursery rhymes, like "Ba, ba, black sheep," or "Old Daddy long legs," which please perfectly sane children, just as Mr. Swinburne's verses please perfectly sane adults, simply as funny or pretty little word-patterns. People do not write such things for the sake of conveying information, but for the sake of amusing and pleasing, just as people do not eat strawberries and cream to nourish their bones and muscles, but to enjoy the taste of a toothsome dish.

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Thus Wagner is a degenerate because he made puns; and Shakspeare, who made worse ones, is a great poet. Swinburne, with his "unmeaning" refrains of "Small red leaves in the mill water," and "Apples of gold for the King's daughter," is a diseased madman; but Shakspeare, with his "In spring time, the only merry ring time, when birds do sing hey ding a ding ding" (if this is not the worst case of "echolalia" in the world, what is echolalia?), is a sober master mind. Rossetti, with his Blessed Damozel leaning out from the gold bar of heaven, who weeps, although she is in paradise, which is a happy place, who describes the dead in one place as "dressed in white" and in another as "mounting like thin flames," and whose calculations of days and years do not resemble those in commercial diaries, is that dangerous and cranky thing, "a mystic"; whilst Goethe, the author of the second part of "Faust," if you please, is a hard-headed, accurate, sound scientific poet. As to the list of inconsistencies of which poor Ibsen is convicted, it is too long to be dealt with in detail.

DEGENERATION IN ART CRITICISM—

When Nordau deals with painting and music, he is less irritating, because he errs through ignorance, and ignorance, too, of a sort that is now perfectly well recognized and understood. We all know what the old-fashioned literary and scientific writer, who cultivated his intellect without ever dreaming of cultivating his eyes and ears, can be relied upon to say when painters and composers are under discussion. Nordau makes a fool of himself with laughable punctuality. He gives us "the most glorious period of the Renaissance" and "the rosy dawn of the new thought" with all the gravity of the older editions of Murray's guides to Italy. He tells us that "to copy Cimabue and Giotto is comparatively easy; to imitate Raphael it is necessary to be able to draw and paint to perfection." He lumps Fra Angelico with Giotto and Cimabue, as if they represented the same stage in

NORDAU'S the development of technical execution, and Pollajuolo with Ghir-
DEGENERA-landajo. "Here," he says, speaking of the great Florentine painters,
TION from Giotto to Masaccio, "were paintings bad in drawing, faded or
smoked, their coloring either originally feeble or impaired by the
action of centuries, pictures executed with the awkwardness of a
learner, . . . easy of imitation, since, in painting pictures in the style
of the early masters, faulty drawing, deficient sense of color, and
general artistic incapacity, are so many advantages." To make any
comment on this would be to hit a man when he is down. Poor Nor-
dau offers it as a demonstration that Ruskin, who gave this sort of
ignorant nonsense its death-blow, was a delirious mystic. Also that
Millais and Holman Hunt, in the days of the pre-Raphaelite brother-
hood, strove to acquire the qualities of the early Florentine masters
because the Florentine easel pictures were so much easier to imitate
than those of the apprentices in Raphael's Roman fresco factory.

IT IS NOW HERR NORDAU'S TURN—

But now, why should I not ask Herr Nordau himself to step before
the looking-glass and tell us frankly whether, even in the ranks of
his "psychiatrists" and lunacy doctors, he can pick out a crank
more hopelessly obsessed with one idea than himself. If you want
an example of "echolalia," can you find a more shocking one than
this gentleman who, when you say "mania," immediately begins to
gabble Egomania, Graphomania, Megalomania, Onomatomania,
Pyromania, Kleptomania, Dipsomania, Erotomania, Arithmomania,
Oniomania, and is started off by the termination "phobia" with a
string of Agoraphobia, Claustrophobia, Rupophobia, Iophobia, Noso-
phobia, Aichmophobia, Belenophobia, Cremnophobia, and Tricho-
phobia? After which he suddenly observes: "This is simply philo-
logico-medical trifling," a remark which looks like returning sanity
until he follows it up by clasping his temples in the true Bedlamite
manner, and complaining that "psychiatry is being stuffed with use-
less and disturbing designations," whereas, if the psychiatrists would
only listen to him, they would see that there is only one phobia and
one mania,—namely, degeneracy. That is, the philologico-medical
triflers are not crazy enough for him. He is so utterly mad on the
subject of degeneration that he finds the symptoms of it in the loftiest
geniuses as plainly as in the lowest jailbirds, the only exceptions being
himself, Lombroso, Krafft-Ebing, Dr. Maudsley, and—for the sake of
appearances—Goethe, Shakspeare, and Beethoven. If a man's senses
are acute he is degenerate, hyperaesthesia having been observed
in asylums. If he is particular as to what he wears, he is degenerate;
silk dressing gowns and knee breeches are grave symptoms, and
woollen shirts conclusive. If he is negligent in these matters, clearly
he is inattentive, and therefore degenerate. If he drinks he is neurotic;
if he is a vegetarian and teetotaler, let him be locked up at once. If

he lives an evil life, that fact condemns him without further words; if, on the other hand, his conduct is irreproachable, he is a wretched "mattoid," incapable of the will and courage to realize his vicious propensities in action. If he writes verse, he is afflicted with echolalia; if he writes prose, he is a graphomaniac; if in his books he is tenacious of his ideas, he is obsessed; if not, he is "amorphous" and "inattentive." Wagner, as we have seen, contrived to be both obsessed and inattentive, as might be expected from one who was "himself alone charged with a greater abundance of degeneration than all the other degenerates put together." And so on and so forth.

WHAT WORK HAS NORDAU DONE FOR THE WORLD THAT HE SHOULD BE ALLOWED TO SPEAK—

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William Morris objected to the abominable ugliness of early Victorian decoration and furniture, to the rhymed rhetoric which has done duty for poetry ever since the Renaissance, to kamptulicon [imitation] stained glass, and, later on, to the shiny commercial gentility of typography according to the American ideal, which was being spread through England by "Harper's" and "The Century"

* * * Well, did he sit down, as Nordau suggests, to rail helplessly at the men who were at all events getting the work of the world done, however inartistically? Not a bit of it; he designed and manufactured the decorations he wanted, and furnished and decorated houses with them; he put into public halls and churches tapestries and picture-windows which cultivated people now travel to see as they travel to see first-rate fifteenth-century work in that kind; the books from his Kelmscott Press, printed with type designed by his own hand, are pounced on by collectors like the treasures of our national museums, all this work, remember, involving the successful conducting of a large business establishment and factory, and being relieved by the incidental production of a series of poems and prose romances which have placed their author in the position of the greatest living English poet. Now let me repeat the terms in which Nordau describes this kind of activity. "Ridiculously insignificant aims—beating the air—no earnest thought to improvement—astoundingly mad projects for making the world happy—persistent rage against everything and every one, displayed in venomous phrases, savage threats, and destructive mania of wild beasts." Is there not something deliciously ironical in the ease with which a splenetic pamphleteer, with nothing to show for himself except a bookful of blunders tacked on to a mock scientific theory picked up at second hand from a few lunacy doctors with a literary turn, should be able to create a European scandal by declaring that the greatest creative artists of the century are barren and hysterical madmen? I do not know what the American critics have said about Nordau; but here the tone has been that there is much in what he says, and

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that he is evidently an authority on the subject with which he deals. And yet I assure you, on my credit as a man who lives by art criticism, that from his preliminary description of a Morris design as one "on which strange birds flit among crazily ramping branches, and blowzy flowers coquet with vain butterflies" to his coupling of Cimabue and Fra Angelico as primitive Florentine masters; from his unashamed bounce about "the conscientious observance of the laws of counterpoint" by Beethoven and other masters celebrated for breaking them to his unlucky shot about "a pedal bass with correct harmonization" (a pedal bass happening to be the particular instance in which even the professor-made rules of "correct harmonization" are suspended),—Nordau gives himself away time after time as an authority upon the fine arts. But his critics, being for the most part ignorant literary men like himself, with sharpened wits and neglected eyes and ears, have swallowed Cimabue and Ghirlandajo and the pedal bass like so many gulls. Here an Ibsen admirer may maintain that Ibsen is an exception to the degenerate theory and should be classed with Goethe; there a Wagnerite may plead that Wagner is entitled to the honors of Beethoven; elsewhere one may find a champion of Rossetti venturing cautiously to suggest a suspicion of the glaringly obvious fact that Nordau has read only the two or three popular ballads like "The Blessed Damozel," "Eden Bower," "Sister Helen," and so on, which every smatterer reads, and that his knowledge of the mass of pictorial, dramatic, and decorative work turned out by Rossetti, Burne Jones, Ford Madox Brown, William Morris, and Holman Hunt, without a large knowledge and careful study of which no man can possibly speak with any critical authority of the pre-Raphaelite movement, is apparently limited to a glance at Holman Hunt's "Shadow of the Cross," or possibly an engraving thereof. And, if Nordau were to convince me tomorrow that I am wrong, and that he knows all the works of the school thoroughly, I should only be forced to assure him regretfully that he was all the greater fool. As it is, I have nothing worse to say of his art criticism than that it is the work of a pretentious ignoramus, instantly recognizable as such by any expert. I copy his bluntness of speech as a matter of courtesy to him.



In a country where art was really known to the people, instead of being merely read about, it would not be necessary to spend three lines on such a work. But in England, where nothing but superstitious awe and self-mistrust prevents most men from thinking about art as Nordau boldly speaks about it; where to have a sense of art is to be one in a thousand, the other nine hundred and ninety-nine being either Philistine voluptuaries or Puritan anti-voluptuaries,—it is useless to pretend that Nordau's errors will be self-evident.